



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-USIP Partners with PRTs to Further Reconciliation in Iraq-

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Baghdad - Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) are working closely with Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) to bring about understanding and tolerance among tribal leaders thus forming the basis for lasting security and economic recovery.

In fall 2007 31 tribal Sheikhs from Mahmoudiya, a district south of Baghdad with a history of violence so it extreme it has commonly been referred to as the "Triangle of Death," met to develop common goals and courses of action to restore stability to their troubled region.



USIP's Iraq office director Rusty Barber working with the local PRT and military counterparts in a reconciliation session with tribal leaders in Taji.

The conference was facilitated by USIP in coordination with the local Brigade Combat Team (10th Mountain Div.), Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team (EPRT) (run by the State Department) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Established in 1984, USIP is an independent, nonpartisan, national institution funded by the U.S. Congress to prevent and resolve violent international conflicts through training programs and reconciliation workshops.

At the conference entitled "Mahmoudiya: Cornerstone of Unity and National Accord," the sheikhs -- eighteen Sunni and thirteen Shia -- focused on critical needs in the areas of security, governance, economy, rule of law and social well-being, according to Rusty Barber who runs the USIP office in Baghdad.

Barber said Mahmoudiya's close proximity to Baghdad and its role as a breeding ground and sanctuary for terrorists seeking to destabilize the city made it a particularly compelling case for reconciliation.

"As many Iraqis involved in this initiative have noted: achieve stability and reconciliation in Mahmoudiya and you will have taken a significant step towards achieving it in Baghdad," he said.

This extraordinary act of reconciliation was the start of a process that has swept across Iraq contributing to Coalition Forces and the Government of Iraq's ability to strengthen security nation-wide. And it was unique, Barber said, because "it was conducted by Iraqis trained in conflict management techniques."

Barber said the conference was the culmination of a four-month initiative undertaken at the request of local government, tribal and civil society leaders "fed up with the havoc wrought by Al Qaeda, militias and criminal gangs on their communities."

Since the surge of the summer of 2007 “a dramatic improvement in the overall security situation” has taken place, Barber added. And tribal leaders and local officials wanted “to broaden and entrench this trend.”

Anxious to take advantage of this improvement in security, local government and tribal leaders reached out to the district’s EPRT which, in turn, contacted USIP’s IZ office for help in devising a reconciliation strategy, he said.

Initial discussions between USIP and local leaders resulted in the Sheikhs agreement to meet in Jordan. USIP funded the trip, helped construct a dialogue format and sent four of its staff to serve as observers. The Ministry of Dialogue and Reconciliation gave its blessing to the mission and appointed a representative to accompany the delegation.

The next meeting of the Sheikhs took place at the Rashid Hotel in Baghdad’s International Zone. Barber said mounting such a logistically challenging event required close coordination among USIP’s Baghdad office, the EPRT and the 10th Mountain Division’s 2nd Brigade.

The Brigade provided funding, security and transportation for the event while USIP worked with local representatives to craft an agenda and a participant list that would ensure broad geographic and tribal representation. USIP also set up a working group comprised of Embassy political officers, Baghdad PRT members and MNF-I officers familiar with reconciliation processes.

American and Iraqi staff at USIP designed an agenda that combined training in negotiation, mediation and group problem solving, with facilitated goal setting and development of courses of action to achieve them.

To allay concerns on the part of the Iraqi Government to the nature and purpose of the conference, Barber said he briefed close Maliki aide and vice chairman of the Iraq Follow Up Committee for National Reconciliation (IFCNR), Dr. Bassema al Sa’adi.

Barber said the intent of the Rashid Hotel meeting was two-fold: “first, to place the focus on current problems rather than on historic grievances in order to help participants recognize common interests. Second, to encourage the sheikhs to take responsibility for conditions in their region, rather than to complain and make demands in the hope that action by outside authorities would follow.”

At the end of the conference the sheikhs presented a final statement that featured a number of reconciliation goals including:

- Allowing tribal youth to join the police and army, with additional units established in order to accommodate them;
- Cooperating with civil society, the judicial system and leaders of the community in supervising and monitoring upcoming elections;
- Requesting the Baghdad provincial council and the governor to provide funds for projects to improve Mahmoudiya’s social well being;
- Providing agricultural supplies and rehabilitate irrigation projects;
- Obtaining financial assistance through low interest loans, cancellation of farmers’ debts and elimination of irrigation fees as well as agricultural land taxes; and
- Establishing an integrity committee to root out administrative and financial corruption.

Barber said USIP was very pleased that at the event’s conclusion tribal leaders signed the statement because “it put the region on the path to social and economic recovery.”